



Each and Every Child

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When failure isn't an option

Algona teacher's personal experience drives her in the classroom

When seventh-grader Parker Schiltz first walked into Peg Vanderhoff's classroom, he was reading at the fourth-grade level – and not passing.

Withdrawn, suffering from low self-esteem and even lower self-confidence, Parker knew the world was quickly leaving him behind.

But Vanderhoff didn't extend pity. It's not pity the child needs, it's an education. And in Peg Vanderhoff's Algona classroom, failure simply isn't an option.



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Peg Vanderhoff works with student Parker Schiltz.

Dubbed the "secretary of war" by her late husband, Vanderhoff draws battle lines against the enemy. The enemy? Ignorance. Ignorance on not being able to do what's right for each and every child. For with the right mixture of pedagogy, method, data, grit and know-how, a child's untapped potential can – and will – be brought to the surface.

With a drill sergeant's determination and the touch of a favorite aunt, she puts her charges through their work. Every child will succeed.

For Vanderhoff, it is personal. Go back to the early 1960s and meet Vanderhoff as a child, Peg Peterson.

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Her teachers concluded she had a cognitive disability, and even tested her to confirm their conclusions when she was in the first grade. What the tests showed – or didn't show – aren't known. What is known is that nothing was done to help Vanderhoff.

By the fourth grade, she still couldn't read. Her abysmal fate looked all but sewn up.

"If I could go back in time, I would tell those teachers that I had a wonderful mind," she said. "If only they could individualize my reading, I would've had a better self image. But they gave up on me. One teacher even said 'you will grow up to be an alcoholic.' Geez. And I don't even drink."

By seventh grade, Vanderhoff had her

first taste of academic success.

"I remember a unit in 7th grade math that was peer taught," she said. "My peer was Paul Hoefing, a very kind, gentle boy who thoroughly understood math. He taught and retaught the lessons until I understood them. We took the test. Paul, as usual, scored highly – only missing two. I missed the same two, so the teacher instantly accused me of cheating. When I protested, the teacher said that I could prove it by retaking the test during my recess that day. Mad enough to spit nails, I agreed, and when I retested and missed the same two, the teacher looked stupefied as he said, 'Huh! I don't get it.'"

"I replied, 'I do. Paul taught me the lesson. He didn't know how to do those two problems, so how could I know how to do them!'"

Even her success would be diminished.

"I didn't feel good about life," she said. "Everything was very defeating. Everything I tackled in school was hard. If there was an accomplishment, it would be marginalized."

It didn't get much better in college – having gotten in through sheer will and determination, and lots of family support.

"I remember trying to survive college by endless hours of reading assignments aloud to try to understand what they said. As I taught myself to read, the process became

easier and easier, and I felt liberated and smart."

There's no question those childhood experiences make the educator that Vanderhoff is today – someone who refuses to prejudge, give up or despair.

"As a special education teacher, I have been determined that my students will learn to read, will learn how to do math, and will learn they are not a victim – but they have power to overcome their deficits," she said.

Parker Schiltz is a shining example of Vanderhoff's work. Entering ninth grade this fall, Parker was reading 325 words per minute at the 10th grade level by the end of the last school year. He ranked in the 99th percentile in the Iowa Assessments – second in his class, thank you very much. And his persona? Outgoing, articulate. Confident with a capital "C."

No surprise he's exiting special education as soon as Vanderhoff knows there are proper supports in place to ensure his continued success.

Parker's world is very different from just a couple years back.

"I just couldn't do anything," Parker said. "I couldn't think about anything but failing."

Seventh grade was the pivotal year.

"We had homework every day," he said. "I couldn't keep up. I thought, 'I just can't do this.' I really didn't think I was smart."

But he started working with Vanderhoff.

"I am confident in my reading today," Parker said. "It makes me feel



Colleen Schiltz says her son's special education experience totally transformed him.

confident. I can succeed at anything if I try. My parents are really happy about this."

That's an understatement, said his mother, Colleen Schiltz.

Before Parker was placed on an Individualized Education Program, she said, "He would hide his tests, and I would find them under the couch. He was ashamed of himself. He would start crying. He didn't want to read."

Schiltz, herself a tutor at Bishop Garrigan High School in Algona, was stumped.

"I had two other children who didn't struggle in school," she said.

But once he started working with Vanderhoff, "everything just started falling into place," she said.

His academics improved vastly, and he

started becoming a different person altogether.

"The biggest thing is that Parker started to believe in himself," Schiltz said. "Peg doesn't believe any kid should feel like a victim. Any time he would make the littlest improvement, she would make a big deal of it. That was huge. The confidence that goes with success, even small successes, is incredible."

Schiltz's praise of Vanderhoff is as enthusiastic as it is heartfelt.

"A lot of times these kids feel they will never measure up," she said. "But Peg won't let that happen with any kid. Whatever Parker wanted to do, he can now. Before it wasn't attainable – it is attainable now."

As for Parker, he thinks he will follow in his big brother's footsteps and go to the University of Iowa.

"I would like to create my own business," he said.

"The confidence that goes with success, even small successes, is incredible."

Vanderhoff shrugs off compliments, and gives credit to her teacher's assistants, Denise Curtis and Jessica Darling.

"We work together as a group," she said. "Oftentimes I see teacher's assistants not used to their utmost talents. It's because of them that this program is going up and beyond. They have talent, they take ownership, they have pride. We are all working together with our maximum gifts."

In order to maximize success in the classroom, Vanderhoff says it is imperative to occasionally get out of the building to see other success stories unfolding.

"I initially learned how to teach reading from my sister, Judy Tange, a now-retired reading recovery teacher in Riceville," she said. "She had taught me the basics, then as I had questions and problems, she'd talk things through with me in endless phone conversations.

"Today, our schools even let me go observe her teaching in the classroom. It is one thing to learn theory; it is another to learn methodology from someone who practices and helps you hone your skills like a surgeon. I don't want my surgeon's learning to be based on text books alone. I want him or her to have lots of hands-on, guided learning. I want him or her



Peg Vanderhoff liberally praises her students' success, driving them to further accomplishments.



Exiting out of special education, Parker Schiltz has his eyes set on following his brother to the University of Iowa.

to know what works and what doesn't before practicing on me!"

Count Vanderhoff as one who truly believes in all her students.

"Special education kids can do amazing things," she said. "When given the support and the skills that they personally need, they can achieve things they could never dream of before. Students want to do better, they don't want to fail.

"We should all ask ourselves, 'Are we really meeting their needs?' Teachers say they can't meet the needs of everyone. I say, why not? It's about caring enough about the child to give them what they need to succeed."

Peg Peterson was lucky to eventually thrive. In Peg Vanderhoff's classroom, luck will have nothing to do with it. The secretary of war will make sure of it.

This is an essay written by one of Peg Vanderhoff's former students who, at the time, was a senior in 2013. Vanderhoff holds this essay near and dear to her heart.

Why am I proud to be an American? What does independence mean to me?

Every American has the right to an education. In other countries it is not as easy to receive an education. In some countries if you are unable to read at the sixth grade, you are weeded out and would probably end up working on a farm or factory where you would make very little money. In America you have the right to attend a public or private school. You are able to get specialized instruction in school and are given more time to be able to go to college, so you can do the career you want to do.

I have dyslexia, and therefore reading can be very challenging for me. I receive a lot of additional assistance with my learning disability so that I may continue to improve my reading skills. In another country I would not receive this additional help. In another country I would probably have to be a field worker or a factory worker because I would not receive the extra help in school and therefore my reading skills would be very low. In America I will be able to do whatever occupation it is that I choose. I will be able to go to college and get extra help there as well. I feel proud that I live in this country and that I am an American.

I will be able to earn more money at a job that I have been trained for, so I can do the things that I enjoy. Even though I am not rich, my choices are not limited in America. I would not be able to race motocross or play football in another country because I wouldn't have enough money to afford to because I would not be earning as much money at a factory.

I also enjoy many freedoms that people in other countries do not. I have the right to choose whichever religion I want. This is important to me and I realize that in some other countries they do not have this right. Because I live in America my options are endless on what I can do with my life and this makes me very proud.